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ABSTRACT

Political science departments in community colleges have the opportunity to demonstrate the validity of liberal arts courses by helping students become aware of both the forces shaping their lives and their options in public and private decision-making. The first problem the political science instructor faces is materials selection. Although an overview text seems the simplest and most comprehensive tool to use in an introductory American government course, it is probably the most disastrous choice from the student's point of view. Issue-oriented readers, which generally have higher interest value than textbooks, offer the best opportunity to involve students in the introductory course. Experiential learning is also fundamental to an effective and meaningful political science course. Projects can range from having students write letters to their congressmen, to designing and conducting public opinion polls. One effective project is a non-partisan voter information campaign for fall term. Courses which carefully and thoughtfully choose materials and active learning experiences assert the virtues and demonstrate the importance of liberal arts education. (LP)

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AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIC EDUCATION

by
Dr. Joanne Reitano

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AMERICAN GOVERNMENT AND CIVIC EDUCATION
PAPER DELIVERED AT THE AMERICAN POLITICAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION
September, 1983 Dr. Joanne Reitano

Everywhere we look, we find the Liberal Arts bemoaning their fate. Enrollments are down. Technological literacy has replaced what we might call Humanistic literacy. Students think only of the job market, administrators think only of FTEs. If the sense of purpose of a Liberal Arts education seems to be threatened in the 4 year colleges, it has been utterly devastated in the 2 year colleges. Of course, one may wonder to what degree the community colleges ever had a firm commitment to Liberal Arts education in the first place. Weren't they always the poor step sisters of the 4 year institutions, a half way house for marginal students, a stepstool (not a ladder) on the way to the lower level job market. Isn't there always some question about the transferability of our courses and the academic legitimacy of our faculty?

It is precisely because the community colleges are in such a precarious position in the academic community that the quality of our Liberal Arts courses must be high. Consider also the massive basic skills problems we face, the diverse non-traditional populations we serve, and the fact that for many of our students the Liberal Arts course they take from us might be the first and the last Liberal Arts course they ever take. In general terms, we have a great responsibility to provide these students with a stimulating, thought-provoking educational experience that will open the intellectual door slammed shut by the spirit (albeit well-intentioned) of narrow vocationlism. In specific terms, we in Political Science have the opportunity to demystify for students the enigma of power and, without propagating myths, to help them become more aware of the forces that shape their lives, more alive to the options they have in their private and public decision-making.

This, then, is the old vision of civics modernized. When we think of the term "civics", we tend to think of political indoctrination, and uncritical patriotism. But, at least according to a 1936 civics book which I fell upon, that was not always the intent. This book, in fact, suggested that civics education meant an emphasis on problem solving encouraging students to work out their own solutions, "to apply general principles to local situations", to actively participate in the life of the community. Such education the book points out, is truly meaningful learning based on the principle of self discovery and intellectual self-determination. This is the way to promote the skills of critical analysis and independent thinking that should be the result of a sol.d Liberal Arts education and that should, inturn, promote civics in the best sense of the word.

So much for theory. Now onto practice. Just how do we achieve these lofty goals. In my eight years at LaGuardia Community College, a cooperative education branch of the CUNY, I have settled upon two key methodologies that have proven successful not only in promoting exciting learning but also in promoting solid learning. And I would suggest that you can't have real learning without having some joy in it.

The first problem in any course is what book to order and this is a crucial decision because the book will determine the entire character of your course. Clearly, your choice reflects your philosophy of education. There are three basic options: The textbook, the reader, and a collection of monographs. The first gives students the widest breadth and the fullest detail, that is, assuming that they read the book. The second provides a variety of short rich interpretations, examples or case studies-something students can focus on and discuss, a point of departure for lectures, a source for the analysis and application of general theory. But a reader

does not cover the basics which then must be dealt with either through a small supplementary overview text or in your lectures. The third option, monographs, is potentially the most interesting and provocative technique but is really a graduate school approach because it assumes a basic fund of knowledge, and invites students to do substantial in-depth investigation and analysis of specific aspects of the course. It assumes a high level of self motivation, reading and writing skills, which I do not think we can demand of all students in their first study of Political Science.

For an introductory American Government course, the choice of an overview textbook is clearly the simplest, the most logical, and the most convenient from the faculty's point of view. It is probably also the most disastrous choice from the students' point of view. To put it bluntly, textbooks (even the best of them) are dull and students won't read them. The charts, the cartoons, the maps, the lists, the definitions, etc., are wonderful teaching tools but are not worth the price if students don't read what's around them. When was the last time you tried to read a basic textbook or even a whole chapter in one. I can't get through them myself. I find them too monotonous, too abstract, too overwhelmed with detail, too discouragingly comprehensive They are really reference books and are not well designed to stimulate students to think. By contrast, readers are inherently selective and issue oriented. Furthermore, there are many good ones the market. Here, it seems to me, is the best opportunity we have to make the most of our introductory level American Government course. Actually the very best option would be a combined text-reader but few of those exist. Readers serve several functions. For students with basic skills problems, they provide short concise selections written in a variety of styles and from a variety of perspectives. Their interest value

is high and they offer many opportunities for short written assignments as well as for classroom discussion. In addition they are less forbidding than a monolithic, omnibus text. The major objection to them is that they force the teacher to cover all the basics through lectures. This is a valid concern but we are deceiving ourselves if we think that teachers don't perform the very same function when they use a text. In fact,students rely on the faculty even more when texts are assigned because they don't read much of the text and have no other structured, inviting reading material available. I contend that it is better to have students read something selective well than to have them read something comprehensive poorly, if at all.

Books are the building blocks for an American Government course but they are not enough. In a subject like Political Science, we have a marvelous opportunity to make each course a dynamic, living educational experience simply by practicing what we preach. Instead of talking, we should be doing and that is how our students will really learn about the complexities of Political Science. That is also how we can best encourage them to partake of the joy of discovery which holds the key to meaningful learning.

Projects for an introductory level American Government course can be as small or as large as suits your style. If you are skeptical about the ideas, you might want to start modestly - by requiring students to write a letter to one of their representatives, by taking the class to visit a loca politician, or by sending students out to do structured interviews of community activists. Getting a littel more ambitious, you might want to design a poll, a controversial debate, a class research project, or a simulation game. Whatever the vehicle, the idea is to

literally get students out of their seats, and to give them a hands - on experience with the people and principles of politics. Far from distracting from the course, this approach solidifies the course by motivating students to want to learn more about what they are experiencing. Nothing is better than direct personal involvement for overcoming apathy, for making abstract theory relevant, and for promoting the spirit of critical inquiry and rational thought.

I have been particularly successful in conducting non-partisan voter information campaigns during the fall term. This is a large project and provides room for every student to contribute - by getting information from various newspapers and campaign headquarters, by drawing up a chart comparing the candidates positions; by typing, reproducing and handing out the chart; by organizing and staffing a voter registration and information table; by designing bulletin board and library displays and by writing articles for the school newspaper. If we add a candidates debate or a student poll to the project, there are more ways to participate - formulating the questions, preparing, distributing, and counting the ballots, not to mention all the administrative details that make any event a success. Such a project requires a lot of work - by faculty and student alike - but it is well worth the effort. Students feel significant as individuals and vibrant as a group. They see the relationship between what we are doing and what we are reading. They apply national principles to local situations and issues. Most importantly, they learn and they learn well. It is an unconventional method towards a conventional end.

In an era which finds the Liberal Arts maligned and beleaguered, It is incumbent on each of us to assert the virtues of a Liberal Arts education and to demonstrate the validity of Liberal Arts skills.

Students need (and want) courses that will challenge and stimulate them, courses that will make them feel like living, thinking people and not treat them like sponges, or robots. As they prepare for life and work in a high technology, service oriented world they need some training in critical thinking and decision making; they need to have a better understanding of the principles of human interaction and political practice. A good American government course can open the door in each of those areas by focusing on issues, by promoting reading and discussion, by encouraging active participation in the political process. Such a course also provides a solid foundation for transfer to a four year college - not through the accumulation of details but through the appreciation of the excitement and complexity of Political Science - both as theory and reality - be it in the nation, the state, the community or the college. And if that isn't civics in the best sense of the word, I don't know what is.